

# Taking America's Past into the Future

## Prescott, Arizona, Plans for the Future of Historic Preservation

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**R**ichard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, explained the theme of this year's National Historic Preservation Week in his "President's Message" on the Trust's Preservation Week 2000 poster. In discussing the theme, "Taking America's Past Into the Future," Moe wrote "...as America enters a new century and a new millennium, we should give serious thought to what we want to take with us on this journey into the future. It is essential that we be vigilant, flexible and well informed in order to deal with the rapid changes in everything from demographics to technology that are sure to have an impact on our irreplaceable historic places."

### ***Historic Context***

In February 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Organic Act that created Arizona Territory, with the primary purpose of claiming the mineral resources that were being discovered in the area, for the benefit of the Union. In 1864, Prescott was established in the mountains of central Arizona as the capital of Arizona Territory and, shortly thereafter, as the county seat of Yavapai County. Laid out in grid in 1864, with 100-foot-wide streets and two city blocks set aside for government buildings, Prescott has a definite midwestern look. In spite of its isolation, Prescott grew fairly quickly and by the time the railroad arrived in 1886-1887, it was a well-established town with a population of 2,100 (1890). In 1889, the territorial capital was moved permanently to Phoenix.

The first buildings (1864-1875) were constructed of locally-made brick, Ponderosa pine logs, and milled lumber. When the railroad arrived, all types of building materials could be obtained, including redwood siding, Victorian trim, cast iron storefronts and pressed metal ceilings. Skilled craftsmen and architects also began to arrive. Also, at about this time, a definite social "upper-crust" was established, and large, ornate

Victorian homes were being constructed on the east side of town. "Whiskey Row" became known throughout the West. This notorious area of town contained from 40 to 70 "drinking establishments," including gambling houses where "good time girls" entertained. Many famous, infamous, and not-so-famous came to drink and gamble on "The Row," including Virgil and Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Tom Mix, and cowboys and businessmen from all over the West.

Throughout the last years of the 19th century and into the 20th century, Prescott continued to grow economically and in population at a slow but fairly steady pace. Current annual growth rate is approximately 4%. In the 1995 special census, Prescott's population was 30,600. Known today as "Everybody's Hometown," Prescott retains hundreds of historic buildings and dozens of historic neighborhoods with an early-20th-century character and small-town charm that bring visitors and new residents from throughout the United States and many other countries.

### ***Prescott's Preservation History***

In 1974, after the removal of a significant 1877 Victorian house from a prominent corner for the construction of a fast food restaurant, the citizens of Prescott formed the Yavapai Heritage Foundation. Shortly thereafter, the formal documentation of Prescott's territorial architecture began. At that time Prescott had a significant stock of territorial-era vintage buildings built before Arizona became a state in 1912. Although a few of those buildings have been lost in the ensuing 25 years, most are still intact and many have been restored.

In 1978, Yavapai Heritage Foundation received a grant and prepared a multiple resource area nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for those territorial commercial buildings that had sufficient integrity to be eligible for the Register, along with a significant number of residential buildings. The next important

step that year was the approval of a Townscape Conservation Ordinance by the city council.

In 1980, this ordinance was replaced by a new Historic Preservation Overlay Ordinance. Prescott also became a Certified Local Government (CLG), adopted a four-page historic preservation plan, and appointed a preservation commission. By this time, the City of Prescott had become a primary participant in the historic preservation movement in the community, but Yavapai Heritage Foundation continued to be very involved as one of the “squeaky wheels” which kept the process moving along.

With the hiring of a part-time staff person in 1990, the City of Prescott assumed full responsibility for documenting historic resources. Currently, there are eight National Register historic districts in place and two in process, comprising more than 700 buildings. There are at least 10 additional districts yet to be documented. Twelve historic preservation overlay districts have been established by city ordinance, including one city-owned archeological site, and one in progress.

Also in 1990, Prescott received an Arizona CLG grant to update the historic preservation ordinance and develop a new ordinance. One of the changes to the provisions of the ordinance was the opportunity to include archeological sites under the protection of historic preservation overlay district ordinances. The Prescott Preservation Commission was actively involved in the drafting and preparation of the new ordinance. The commission was also involved in the review of several other proposed ordinances and plans, including the 1990 Prescott General Plan, a Downtown Specific Area Plan, and various changes to the zoning code.

A commission member involved in many of these activities was Jerry White, a real estate broker, a land planning consultant, and a former



*The 100 block of W. Gurley Street in downtown Prescott before (1898) and after (1904) the 1900 fire. The 1904 image (below) closely reflects the street's current appearance, although the street is now paved, and the board sidewalks are long gone and have been replaced with concrete and brick.*



county planning director who has lived in Prescott most of his life. Mr. White brought to the commission an excellent background and interest in land-use planning and development issues. He also brought to the commission a great love of and respect for Prescott and a desire to preserve and enhance the historic character of the community for the future. As vice-chairman and chairman of the Prescott Preservation Commission, Mr. White proposed the idea of a comprehensive planning document dedicated specifically to historic preservation. He provided the impetus for the commission to move forward with budget requests, a federal Historic Preservation Fund grant application, and to hire a consultant to prepare a historic preservation master plan.

### Historic Preservation Master Plan

The purpose of Prescott's *Historic Preservation Master Plan (Plan)*, as stated in chapter one, is to provide a "proactive means of planning for the identification, preservation, and protection of Prescott's character and historic resources in order to enhance the quality of life and economic well-being of current and future generations."

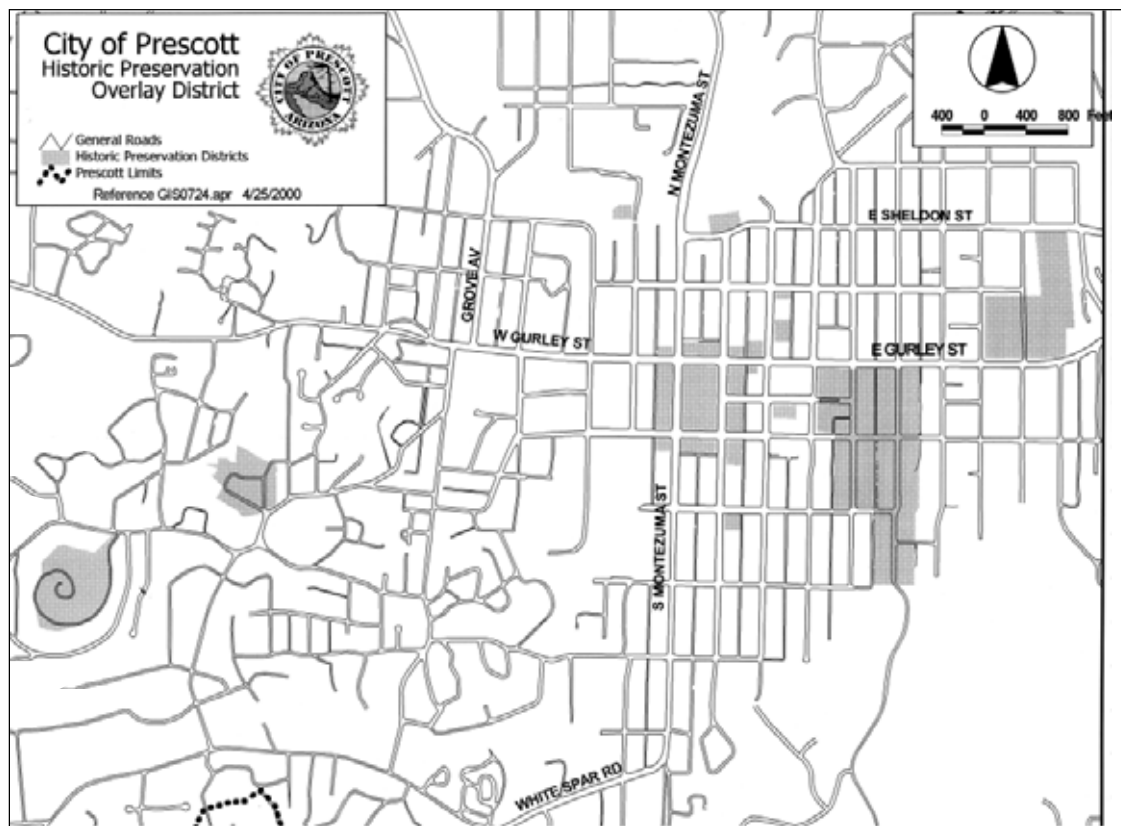
The *Plan's* first two chapters provide "a descriptive overview of preservation in general, and the resources of Prescott in particular, and outline the philosophical goals and recommendations for preservation and development." Chapters for each historic district stand alone, so that a user of the *Plan* would have to read only the first two chapters along with the individual chapter for the historic district of interest. For ease of use, each historic district chapter contains the same information in the same order, as follows:

- an overview of the district,
- location of the district,
- history of the district,
- formation of the district,
- the responsibilities of the Prescott Preservation Commission,

- a description of the qualities and design benefits of the district, and
- district recommendations.

The recommendation sections of the chapters are some of the most important elements of the *Plan*; these recommendations are the key components that trigger the implementation aspects of the *Plan*. Many of the recommendations involve very specific suggestions dealing with siting of buildings, landscape/streetscape, building scale and massing, materials, open space, future projects (including infill), circulation and parking, and proximity to other land uses. The other very important recommendation section of each chapter of the *Plan* addresses zoning issues.

The importance of zoning in relation to historic preservation is often underestimated. As stated in chapter two of the *Plan*, "...zoning often presents a serious threat to the integrity of historic neighborhoods. ...When zoning regulations and historic preservation goals work at cross-purposes both suffer." Chapter two provides a series of questions to ask as a starting point for assessing the conflicts between zoning and preservation. Some of those questions include:



- Are historic residential neighborhoods with single family houses zoned for single family residential or other compatible uses?
- Do lot sizes and building setback requirements from the front lot line match historic patterns?
- Does zoning for areas immediately surrounding the historic district provide an adequate buffer against development that would have a negative impact on the historic area?
- Does zoning require so many off-street parking spaces that it hampers the rehabilitation of historic buildings or the construction of compatible infill buildings?
- Does zoning allow increased residential densities in older historic neighborhoods (such as four-plexes or apartments)?
- Are minimum lot size provisions larger than actual lot sizes in historic neighborhoods, thereby creating non-conforming, vacant lots too small to be developed without applying for a zoning variance?

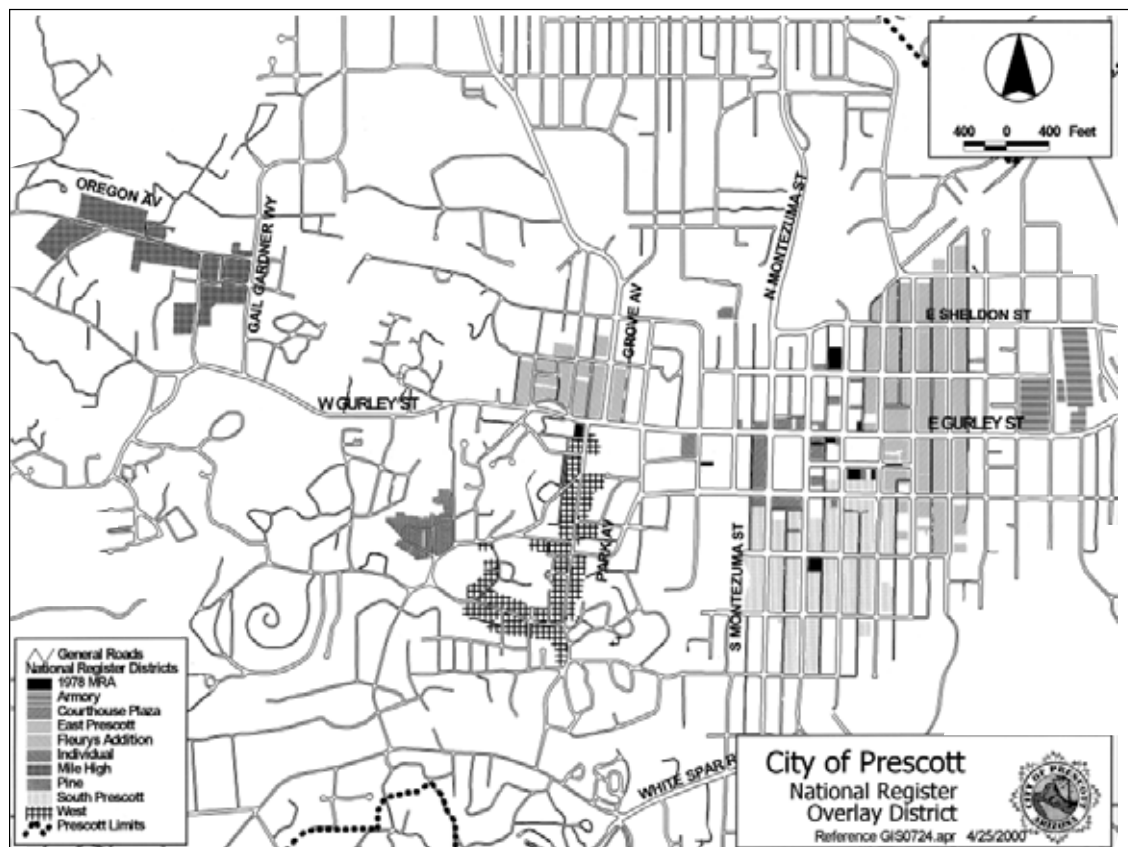
These questions were used to assess the zoning designations in each historic district. Specific recommendations were made in the *Plan* for changes in the zoning code to allow for more flexibility; for changes in zoning, particularly down-zoning, to reduce incompatible uses or

densities; for reduction in allowed building heights; and for elimination of incompatible adjacent uses which may be detrimental to the preservation of the historic district.

#### **Implementation of the Historic Preservation Master Plan**

The *Plan* was adopted by Prescott on December 9, 1997, as an addendum to the 1990 *General Plan*. After the adoption of the *Plan*, an assessment was prepared that listed the impact on each Prescott department if all of the recommendations of the *Plan* were to be implemented. Some of the financial impacts are considerable, since, in some districts, re-paving, the installation of sidewalks, curbs and/or gutters, and traffic abatement devices are recommended. Further, the potential impacts on staff are also considerable, particularly in regard to the time commitment necessary to prepare re-zonings and historic preservation overlay district designations, nominations to the National Register, and other recommended projects.

Prescott has been gradually tackling various aspects of the recommended general implementation strategies. Toward that goal, the city has recently hired an additional community planner whose responsibilities include assisting with the



preparation of neighborhood plans, which often have a historic preservation component, handling re-zonings, and assisting with the formation of historic preservation overlay districts.

Prescott has begun the process of proactively re-zoning some areas, and although none of these are historic district re-zonings at this time, this work will set the stage for the concept of city-initiated down-zoning in the community. An overlay district that limits building heights in the downtown has been approved.

Information about historic district designations, for both National Register and historic preservation overlay districts has been entered into the city's Geographic Information System (GIS). Accessing the GIS system provides this specialized data for any parcel of land to which it applies. Also, the GIS allows us to make many types of customized maps. The dozens of maps that are included in the *Plan* were produced with GIS technology.

#### ***The Future of the Historic Preservation Master Plan***

Historic preservation is a very important component of Prescott's tourism and service-

based economy. The implementation of the *Plan* is a priority of management staff, and an analysis is currently in process that will set the priorities for the implementation and help to move historic preservation to the forefront in the community. This will not be an instant accomplishment, but planning for the implementation of the *Plan*, including the continuous updating of the *Plan*, will help to ensure that it is not a document that simply sits on a shelf, but will assist Prescott in taking our past into the future.

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*Nancy L. Burgess has been the half-time historic preservation specialist for the City of Prescott since August 1990. Prior to working for the city, she served as a member, Vice-Chairman, and Chairman of the Prescott Preservation Commission, and was very involved in creating the 1990 Historic Preservation Ordinance for the City of Prescott. With the exception of the 1978 Multiple Resource Area National Register nomination for Prescott, Ms. Burgess has prepared all of the historic district nominations for Prescott.*

Illustrations courtesy City of Prescott, Arizona.

## ***Geographic Information Systems and Prescott's Historic Preservation Master Plan***

October 1996 brought the City of Prescott kicking and screaming into the 20th century with respect to Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Over the past three years, Prescott's GIS division has been developing tools to bring together a citywide GIS application for viewing, reviewing, and reporting on a variety of spatial information. GIS users have the ability to check individual parcels or lots for a multitude of information, which is available in both map and tabular form. In respect to the historic preservation data, the GIS is used to reference differing historic preservation overlay districts and National Register historic districts. These can be global (all encompassing) references or single parcel queries. The goal of the GIS is to gather and store pertinent information to meet the needs of the users within the Community Development Department (which includes our historic preservation specialist). A single tool button has been developed to display all information contained inside a particular parcel. Information includes historic preservation overlay districts, the National Register historic districts, other zoning overlay districts, zoning, site address information, owner information, and land use information. This tool is a quick way to document any issues that may affect one's decisionmaking process about a piece of property—a one-stop-shop for zoning information.

In the future, digital imagery will be linked to existing historic preservation overlay district and National Register historic district parcels to both document current status, parcel by parcel, as well as engineer a "virtual" walk of Prescott's historic properties. This may include three-dimensional "maps" along with historic and contemporary photographs.

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